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Clerk, Justice Committee
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Date: 17 October 2007

Dear Mr Wands

INQUIRY INTO THE EFFECTIVE USE OF POLICE RESOURCES

I refer to your letter dated 17 September 2007 inviting comments on the above by 17 October, a timescale that has not permitted consideration by the full Board. However, the Board's Finance and Policy Working Group has had an opportunity to consider the questions in your letter and I have been instructed to convey their views as below, which will be reported to the full Board at its next scheduled meeting on 22 November for homologation. Should the full Board at that time wish to add any further comments, I shall so advise you.

The Working Group also had the opportunity to see an early draft of the proposed collective response on behalf of the Scottish Police Authorities Conveners Forum. The Working Group Members were generally supportive of the various points we understand are being made in that response. The Working Group, however, welcomes the opportunity to express its own particular views directly to the Committee. As requested, I have used the Inquiry's specific questions as the basis for this submission.

1. "How many police officers do police forces need in order to effectively tackle all elements of their work and are the resources provided to the police sufficient to achieve this?"

The Northern Joint Police Board values the traditional model of community policing and fully recognises the public preference for high visibility front line policing. The Board is also well aware that the range of police responsibilities has grown over time, and that new legislation imposing new duties is not always matched by an appropriate increase in resources to meet these additional responsibilities. While the Board does not doubt the willingness and ability of Northern Constabulary to fulfil all its responsibilities to the highest standards possible within current resources, Members are conscious of potential tension between the various demands placed on Forces and of the danger of eventual overstretch.

There is also a clear perception among the general public throughout the country that police resources are inadequate, which impacts on public confidence and, ultimately, quality of life.

Accordingly, the Board would clearly welcome an injection of additional resources and expects the Scottish Government to honour its current commitment to introduce 1000 new officers across Scotland and to make a fair allocation to this Force. The Board also notes with concern the conclusions drawn by Professor Arthur Midwinter in his recent report on “Police Funding in Scotland: A Review of Trends in the Post-Devolution Period”, showing that police spending per capita in Scotland is the lowest of all the four nations of the UK, despite Scottish spending being significantly higher in other major public services, reflecting the higher needs and higher unit costs in rural Scotland; and also showing that the police share of the Scottish Budget has fallen consistently since devolution, suggesting that policing has been a low budget priority for the Scottish Executive.

While the Board has consistently maintained that new legislative responsibilities should be accompanied by new resources on an ongoing basis, it also feels strongly that resource allocation must take account of the particular challenges faced by any particular Force. In the case of Northern Constabulary, it is vital that there be full recognition of the resource implications of policing the particular rural characteristics of this area in terms of both geography – remoteness and peripherality - and of population sparsity. Such factors neither reduce nor simplify the policing need – they bring particular challenges, for example in terms of officer deployment, response times, asset distribution and unit costs.

While fully supporting the argument for additional resources now, the Board would however question how meaningful it is to attempt to define either the optimal number of officers or the correct level of resources without a “root and branch” review of the role of the Police Service in today’s society. Otherwise, there is a risk that an unsatisfactory piecemeal approach will be taken to resourcing the current workload, or to choosing which functions to divert elsewhere (see 3 below). The last time a fundamental review was carried out was that by the Royal Commission on the Police in 1962; the Board believes that a further review is long overdue and would urge that this be put in place to allow informed progress.

2. *“What is the role and remit of Chief Constables in prioritising resources on different areas of policing?”*

While emphasising the importance of good relationships between Chief Constables and their respective police authorities, the Board recognises fully the autonomy of Chief Constables in operational matters and thus in prioritising resources on different areas of policing. It is important that Chief Constables should not be subject to party political pressure in operational matters.

3. *“Which traditional police functions should always be carried out by police officers and which can be carried out by others?”*

The Board believes that a number of functions currently carried out by uniformed police officers could satisfactorily be the responsibility of other agencies - potentially, for example, in areas such as mental health or liquor licensing. However, any such decisions should be reached in the context of the fundamental review of the Service called for above, and should take into account the experience and views of professional officers. The review could also consider not only functions suitable for complete transfer of responsibility, but also

appropriate areas for joint working with other agencies.

At the same time, while it would appear that a number of functions currently undertaken by the police do not necessarily require the qualifications and expertise of trained uniformed officers, the Board recognises the value of maintaining strong grass root community links, as these underpin effective community policing. Such factors should also be taken into account when reviewing functions, so that positive benefits are not lost nor changes introduced that ultimately prove detrimental to the overall success of policing.

4. *“If Chief Constables favour recruiting additional officers, how do they propose to deploy them?”*

While this is a matter primarily for Chief Constables, the Board can envisage that the public priority in these circumstances would be for front line policing and would support this. However, Members recognise that front line policing is not necessarily of the high visibility type that most readily invokes public confidence, and that covert operations are also important.

5. *“How quickly can additional police officers be recruited and trained?”*

The Board recognises that ACPOS and the Scottish Police College would best identify potential timescales for recruitment and induction but is confident that, through cooperation and willingness to make a short term surge in the training effort, it should be possible to recruit and train the additional officers within a reasonable timescale

6. *“What role do police authorities or joint police boards (including elected Councillors) play in determining local policing priorities?”*

The Members of this Board interact with the Police Service at various levels in addition to formal business at Board and Sub-Committee/Working Group meetings. At local area level there are regular Member meetings with Area Commanders. Within the Highland Council area, the new Ward Forums set up since the May 2007 local authority elections potentially offer new avenues for promoting police/local authority/community contacts. The Chief Constable invites Board Member participation in his periodic senior management Strategy Seminars. All provide opportunities for the elected Board Members to represent their local communities and to influence the setting of local priorities.

7. *“How do policing priorities differ between urban and rural areas?”*

The Board recognises that urban and rural areas largely share the same concerns on crime issues, such as the misuse of drugs and crimes of violence and/or dishonesty. However, differentiation again arises when one factors in the impact of population sparsity, remoteness and peripherality (see 1 above) on the practicalities of delivering policing services to tackle these issues.

Members also believe that the rural public have higher expectation levels of their police

service, particularly in relation to what might in more urban areas be regarded as low level crime, attracting a lower priority response. Such higher expectations in rural communities can create their own pressures on deployment and on prioritisation. Inevitable factors such as longer rural response times, which will distort crude performance indicators, may also affect the public perception of police performance.

8. *“How would police boards prefer to see additional resources deployed?”*

The Board supports the comments in the draft response on behalf of the Scottish Police Authorities Conveners Forum, with its general emphasis on front line policing (see also 4 above), and shares its concerns that the current policing model, with the ever-increasing need to prioritise scarce resources, may lead to some areas of service delivery suffering in future.

9. *“What is the view of the general public about the priorities for additional police resources – more community officers, targeting serious crime or, perhaps, road traffic offences?”*

Members are aware that Northern Constabulary conducts two-yearly public surveys, whose results regularly indicate a demand for more officers on the ground, which again suggests a demand for highly visible front line officers. Members are also aware from past surveys that the public in this area attach great significance to road traffic issues, and Members are conscious of the number of such incidents involving young people, often with tragic consequences. The Board will be interested to learn what views the Committee receives from the general public.

Conclusion

While the Board welcomes an early injection of additional resources, it would urge that a proper consideration of the issues raised within the Inquiry remit requires a fundamental review of the role of the Police Service in today’s society. Issues such as identification of appropriate establishment levels, redistribution of functions, proper allocation of funding, informed public comment and effective future planning need to be considered on the basis of sound evidence and in-depth study.

The Board trusts that the Committee will find these comments helpful.

Yours sincerely

CLERK TO THE BOARD